

Determining a Child's Developmental Age



Determining a child's developmental age is probably one of the most useful things any of us can do, because it tells us the age level a child is actually performing at.



As soon as I started working with children it became apparent that a lot of non-specific terms were used to describe childhood issues. The term 'developmental delay' is one such term, and while it tells us the child has a delay in their development, it doesn't tell us how big the delay actually is. I wanted a way to quantify these delays so that we knew what was going on for the child, and it turned out there was a very simple way of doing this.

Throughout the early childhood developmental sequence children are acquiring and refining skills and demonstrating various abilities to perform all sorts of different tasks. It turns out that much of this is age specific; meaning that we know what tasks a child should be performing by a certain age. However, it seems that we were routinely overlooking the obviousness of what children were telling us about the age level they were performing at, because we lacked the context to make sense of it all. We to be able to understand performance in far more subtle way, in order to see what is actually going on..



It quickly became apparent to me that children with a developmental delay were revealing the age level of their task performance in their visual perceptual evaluation.¹ It was already apparent to me that there were three other areas of performance, which correlated to what I was seeing in these evaluations. Consequently, we can now be quite specific about the age level a child is performing at ie: their developmental age.



There are many advantages in determining a child's developmental age. Firstly, if a child of 7 years has a developmental age of 3 years, then they are obviously going to struggle with tasks we would expect of a 7 year old. One of the most common things I heard said from observers of Visual Perceptual Therapy sessions is, "Well, if they can't do that, it's no wonder they can't read (or whatever else.)" It is also not uncommon for the mothers of children I work with, to shed some tears when they realise the level their child is actually performing at. Ultimately, determining a child's developmental age will stop a great deal of unnecessary pressure being placed on them, to perform tasks they are actually unable perform.

Most people who work with children, find knowing the child's developmental age to be one of the most useful pieces of information they ever receive. However, this something most people can do, negating the need to see a professional to tell you something you can work out for yourself.

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We use three areas of performance to identify a child's developmental age.

- Handwriting
- Speech and language
- General maturity

These areas are particularly sensitive to developmental disruptions, because of the degree of refinement in performance it takes to perform or generate them.

Handwriting

Handwriting is one of the most complex tasks we will ever undertake. It is so much more than motor function alone, and the list of things we are actually doing when we are writing is huge, with most of these things are occurring before the child ever picks up their pencil. I could probably write a chapter in a book on what it takes to write a simple story, so let's just say that it is an enormously intricate task, requiring a great deal of refinement throughout all of our performance, in order for any of us to perform it competently.

¹ Interestingly, some children who struggle do not necessarily have a developmental delay. Usually the root cause of their struggle is very minor and, while it may cause some significant disruption in some areas of task performance, they are usually mature, articulate and very capable in other areas of their life.

As any child ages, their performance and competency should naturally improve. In handwriting we should see them demonstrating increasing precision and control over their pen or pencil, while producing longer and ever more complex pieces of work. This progress should be obvious to all.



If you have children of your own or work with them, you will probably be very aware of the quality of letter formation and how the child holds their pencil, relative to age related performance. Because of this, we can have a child write their name and immediately know if their performance is age appropriate or not. If that performance is less than expected for their age, we can typically assign an age level to that performance with, and that age level we have identified is the child's developmental age.

Speech and Language

Speech and language is another highly refined area of performance; and, like handwriting it also a very complex skill. It calls on many subskills, abilities and processes, and it also becomes increasingly refined as the child ages.



Speech and language development is also clearly related to the age of the child. We know that a child of 3 years communicates entirely differently to a child of 8 years; consequently, we are able to associate different levels of performance to different age levels, allowing us to determine what age level the child is performing at.

General Maturity

Maturity is also an eclectic mix of different areas of refined performance, and it is also extremely sensitive to any breakdown in those core skills, abilities and processes.



We all tend to make determinations about the age of children, based on their general demeanour. Most of us have had experiences of thinking a child is a certain age and discovering we were wrong. We may think a tall child, or a high performing child is older than they are. However, overall, the age level we tend to associate with general demeanour, behaviour and actions is typically quite accurate, especially when we link this to handwriting and speech and language performance. I recall one mother of a 10 year old boy and a 6 year old girl, telling me that it was like having two 6 year olds in the house. Unknowingly, she had already identified the developmental age of her son, without understanding its relevance to his overall level of performance.

Overview

Fundamentally, all of our performance is arising from the exact same place, it's just that it manifests and expresses through the different avenues or channels of our performance. Clinically those channels are known as the areas of human performance and comprise of neurological, cognitive, physiological, psychological, social and emotional performance, which cumulate in the things we do on a daily basis. However, what we may not have fully acknowledged is that everything we do is comprised of patterns of performance. It's no mistake that we talk of speech or motor patterns. However, seeing this performance through the lens of visual perceptual performance allows us to see how those patterns arise from the exact same place and how they are constructed. At our core, those patterns are the results of our ability to form inter-relationships between pieces of sensory information, and when we do this, patterns naturally coalesce and come together in the performance we can all see. Fundamentally, any breakdown in our task performance is the result of an inability to form various inter-relationships, leading to a breakdown in pattern recognition and construction.

At the core of our performance there is no difference between constructing motor and speech patterns and constructing patterns from letters and numbers, and being able to read and write and perform mathematically. However, when we understand how it is we come to perform tasks such as literacy and numeracy, we begin to see any struggle a child has is only ever a symptom of a much deeper problem. We also come to understand that the child's struggle we are observing is never confined to just one area of performance. Any failure at the core of performance is proliferated throughout everything they are doing.

Kids are amazing little creatures; we only have to correct their core level of performance and most of them will do the rest, taking the gains they have made in the Visual Perceptual Therapy out into everything they do on a daily basis. They are so involved in life and exploring life from every angle or perspective imaginable, that they cannot help but make use of their new found abilities. And, working at such a subtle level of performance means that we don't have to invest great amounts of time and effort into getting these results. Most children exhibit very apparent improvements in performance after just one therapy sessions.

Summary

Once a child's developmental age has been identified, we can start to look at how we are interacting with them, and how we may be expecting more from them than they are capable of delivering. We also need to be aware that school is usually very difficult for these children, because they are typically being asked to perform at a level they are incapable of.

Of course there is little value in identifying the developmental age of a child and then doing nothing about it. These children do need therapy, and it is far more helpful if the therapy targets the core of their perception and performance, rather than the outcome or consequences of it.



If you would like to know more about the Visual Perceptual Therapy, and how we can correct childhood struggles, you can visit the website www.visualperceptual.com or contact me via info@visualperceptual.com

The Visual Perceptual Therapy is available all around the world, via Skype.

Natoya Rose
Occupational Therapist

*With that, I would like to welcome you to my world,
the world of visual perceptual performance*

